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AUTHOR Jones, Gwendolyn S.
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ABSTRACT

A representative selection for studying African American autobiography as a literary discipline is "A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South" by Anna Julia Cooper, published in 1892. As a literary form, the book is a series of eight essays: four essays about women and their relation to other groups or their place in the overall human community; and four essays that explore the economic, literary, political, and philosophical constructs that race can and does create. As a source of information, the book includes biographical data about the author, describes the historical period in which it was written, and provides information about classes of people. In giving writing assignments, teachers sometimes treat students as though they have no history and no culture. Autobiography, however, can serve as a form of empowerment for the individual and the group, and student writers need to know that it represents a collective experience. Whether used as a source of information or as a literary form, "A Voice from the South" would be appropriate in a variety of courses covering a variety of themes, including education reform, the family, employment, feminism, and the history of the African American woman. (Contains 22 references.) (RS)

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Gwendolyn S. Jones

ANNA JULIA COOPER: AN EXAMINATION

In keeping with the 1994 conference theme, COMMON CONCERNS, UNCOMMON REALITIES: TEACHING, RESEARCH, AND SCHOLARSHIP IN A COMPLEX WORLD, we must be concerned about what we teach and how we teach it. For our panel, "Expanding Territory: (Multi)Cultural Considerations of Genre", autobiography is our "expanding territory." Autobiography works well for understanding the relationships among literature, history, social forces, political forces, and economic conditions. In addition, autobiography as a form of literature is useful in the study of a number of disciplines, including history, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics.

In recent years, particularly since the 1960's, autobiography has generated much critical interest (Braxton 6). There are some problems, however, in defining the genre. Blasing considers that definition is difficult for a number of reasons: (1) the forms are created by each writer (xv); (2) it is an open ended genre with a time before and a time after it (xxv); (3) its boundaries are unbounded (xxv). Blasing states, "Since the subject and form of autobiography meet in the historical experiences of its author-hero, the genre naturally remains quite protean....The forms of its expression are created by each writer out of personal needs (xv)." These personal needs led to the creation of different subgenres, including the slave narratives, travelogues, reminiscences, historical memoirs, diaries, journals, and letters.

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Olney believes that "there is no evolving autobiographical form to trace from a beginning through history to its present state because man has always cast his autobiography and has done it in that form to which his private spirit impelled him..." (3).

Spengemann, on the other hand, sees that the various definitions have several features in common: first, they are stipulative; that is, how the word "autobiography" will be used in certain instances. Second, the definition stipulated is an indication of the use to be made of the work designated. Third, whatever the definition, it is expected to hold true for all historical periods (185-186). This leads the critic to determine how to approach the study of autobiography: is it valuable as a source of information or is it valuable as literature? When autobiography is a source of information, it provides biographical data; it describes historical periods and national cultures; it supports the scholarly disciplines; and it describes classes of people. When autobiography is studied as a source of information, the governing conditions outside the work include cultural, social, or personal situations of the writer.

Further, Spengemann sees that autobiography is valuable as a literary form. That the form of autobiography is unique leads to two types of studies: "inquiries into the conditions responsible for the peculiar traits of autobiography, and comparisons of the finished product with other literary forms... " (207). The governing conditions inside the work include the structure, the techniques, and the language used.

Much of American literature is autobiographical. Advantages of the study of autobiographical literature are that there is an abundance of the literature and a variety of approaches to its study. Not only do we acquire information and analyze a literary form; according to Olney, autobiographical literature "... Brings an increased awareness,through an understanding of another life in another time and place, of the nature of our own selves and our share in the human condition" (vii). Spengemann notes that no matter what we study--the subject of autobiography itself, autobiography as a source of information about some other subject, or autobiography as literary work--two schools of thought on its methods will include (1) that it must employ biography; that is, it must be historical, rather than fictional; (2) that writers can present themselves in whatever form they wish (xii).

Autobiography for so long written by and about males, rarely depicted the conditions of women. The early slave narratives were forerunners of autobiographies written by African Americans. That this genre is important in African American literature can be attested by its endurance and longevity. For this reason autobiography is a focal point for the study of gender and is particularly valuable in the study of African American women. Since the 1980s, serious efforts have been made to study the history, styles, themes, and structures of the autobiographical tradition of black women (Braxton 7).

One book, A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South

by Anna Julia Cooper, published in 1892, is particularly appropriate for our consideration here today. (These biographical notes are summarized from Foster (Written...), Hutchinson, Lerner, and Shockley.) Annie Julia Haywood was born in 1858 or 1859 in Raleigh, North Carolina. She was born a slave but was probably freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. She entered St. Augustine Normal School at age 9 and stayed there for 14 years, part of which time she tutored pupils many of whom were older than she. Anna Julia Cooper was among the first three African American women to earn a bachelor's degree at Oberlin College in 1884. Three years later, she was awarded the master's degree on the strength of her teaching experience. While principal at M Street School (which she later named Paul Laurence Dunbar High School) in Washington D. C., she improved the curriculum so that the school was accredited; many graduates went on to attend Ivy League colleges and universities.

Anna Julia Cooper began doctoral studies at Columbia University in 1914 at age 55. A year later, she took over the care of the five children of her adopted nephew following the death of his wife. She earned the doctoral degree from the Sorbonne at age 65, after writing and defending her dissertation in French. In 1930 Cooper retired from Dunbar High School and became second president of Freylinghusen University in Washington, D. C., where she served until 1939. She retired from teaching at Freylinghusen in 1949 at age 90. She died in 1964 at age 105. Among her accomplishments: educator, education reformer, human rights

advocate, lecturer, scholar, author, feminist, university president.

If we analyze A Voice from the South as a literary form, what we see at first glance is a series of eight essays; the four essays in the first section are about women and their relation to other groups or their place in the overall human community. The titles are

1. Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race
2. The Higher Education of Woman
3. "Woman vs. The Indian" and
4. The Status of Woman in America

In the second section, the four essays explore "the economic, literary, political, and philosophical constructs that race can and does create" (Foster, Written 188). The titles are

5. Has America a Race Problem; If So How Can It Best Be Solved?
6. The Negro as Presented in American Literature
7. What Are We Worth? and
8. The Gain From a Belief

Rather than analyze A Voice from the South as literature, with emphasis on structure, technique, language, and themes or perhaps on a comparison of structure and theme with the slave narrative, this essay will concentrate on A Voice from the South as a source of information, keeping in mind that it must employ biography and

that is must be historical. Selected passages will show how A Voice from the South is indeed a valuable source of information in that it includes biographical data about Anna Julia Cooper, describes the historical period in which it was written, and provides information about classes of people.

In the essay entitled "The Higher Education of Woman", Cooper describes the times and the national culture during the late 19th century, especially with regard to prevailing attitudes about formal education for women. She questioned the credibility of a literary work published in Paris in 1801 entitled "Shall Woman Learn the Alphabet", where the author proposed a law prohibiting women from learning to read (48). She points out that by 1833, only one college admitted women and that college had a "Ladies' Course". The regular B. A. was the Gentlemen's Course (49). Higher education was available "only to a select few" women down to about 1850. Other colleges began to admit women so that by 1890, there were 198 colleges for women and 207 coeducational colleges and universities in the United States offering the B. A. to women (50). In preparing to address the American Conference of Educators, she actually wrote to colleges to ascertain the number of colleges which admitted women, to determine how many also admitted black women (Hutchinson 92), and the number of black women who had completed the B. A. course in each college.

Cooper's concern was not limited to women's rights. She saw the dominance of the strong over the weak and was against it. She crusaded vigorously for the weak, no matter what race. She asked,

"Whence this sneaking admiration for bullies and prize fighters?...Whence the scorn of so-called weak or unwarlike races and individuals?..." (51).

In this essay, "The Higher Education of Woman", these biographical statements indicate Anna J. Cooper's early interest in schooling.

> ...When I was a child I was put into a school near home that professed to be normal and collegiate, i.e. to prepare teachers for colored youth, furnish candidates for the ministry, and offer collegiate training for those who should be ready for it....Class after class was organized for these ministerial candidates (many of them men who had been preaching before I was born) (76).

In addition to the "I", she also refers to herself as "The Black Woman."

In the essay entitled "The Status of Woman in America", Cooper discusses social classes. She marks history as having passed through "periods of discovery, of settlement, of developing resources and accumulating wealth..." (132). His desire to gain capital (131) leads Cooper to describe the business man as "cold, mathematical, calculating, practical and unsentimental..." This was a period in history she calls the "Accumulative Period" (128) or the "acquisitive age" (131). She details the roles of women in each of these periods(133). She speaks of "the dawn of a new day" (132) at the "first congressional recognition of woman in this country, and this Board of Lady Managers constitute[s] the first

women legally appointed by any government to act in a national capacity."

Cooper sees woman's contribution to the world and claims, "Her kingdom is not over physical forces. Not by might, nor by power can she prevail. Her position must ever be inferior where strength of muscle creates leadership....In a reign of moral ideas she is easily queen" (133).

Mention is made of specific groups of women, including for example, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (134).

According to Cooper, "The colored woman today occupies...a unique position in this country....She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both" (134).

She mentions the "work and influence of the colored women of America", including Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, Sojourner Truth, Charlotte F. Grimke, Hallie Quinn Brown, and Fannie Jackson Coppin (141-142).

An advocate for human rights, Cooper is concerned about the black man's exclusion from the vote (138).

As we continue to teach in an increasingly complex world, we must continue to review the past and to look ahead to the 21st century. One way to bridge this span is by studying the abundant autobiographical American literature. In a composition course where the method is student-centered, personal writing is a frequent activity. In giving writing assignments, teachers

sometimes treat students as though they have no history and no culture (Wilson 663). Autobiography, however, can serve as a form of empowerment for the individual and for the group, and student writers need to know that it represents a collective experience. Models by and about males and females, including minorities, should by used.

In literary criticism, with its emphasis on theme and form, for African American autobiography, the leading questions are "What does it mean?" And "How does it work?" (Baker 80-81)

A representative selection for studying African American autobiography as a literary discipline is A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South by Anna Julia Cooper. Whether used as a source of information or as a literary form, A Voice from the South would be appropriate in a variety of courses covering a variety of themes, including education reform, the family, employment, feminism, and history of the African Aamerican woman.

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